

In Memorium: Willard F. Day, Jr.

Terry J. Knapp
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Willard Day made the published works of B. F. Skinner the center of his professional life, and he valued *Verbal Behavior* above all others.

Willard offered to his graduate students a unique reading of *Verbal Behavior*, one that emphasized the epistemological content of the book, in the sense of knowing as discriminative responding. For him *Verbal Behavior* was a record of Skinner's discriminative responding to scientific and literary works, and to the general talk and writing of others.

In the late 1960s, with his earliest graduate students, Willard pioneered studies in which subjects would receive points for talking outloud in an otherwise barren cubical. Environmental manipulations would be occasionally introduced. The verbal products of the subjects were recorded and transcribed, and attempts made to relate the environmental manipulations to the changing talk. Willard described the studies as "involving an effort to employ a method directly analogous to Skinner's method in the *The Behavior of Organisms*, except that, in this case, the effect of manipulations are observed with respect to baselines consisting of patterns of on-going verbal behavior." The transcripts were retained in red and black notebooks, and came to be referred to as the "Redbook" and "Blackbook" studies.

Prior to these studies, Willard had obtained in the early 1960s a grant from the U. S. Department of Education to study the teaching of thinking through programmed instruction. The materials he developed were greatly influenced by the sections of *Verbal Behavior* concerned with the scientific verbal community and with thinking.

In later years Willard focused on what had come to be referred to as the "Reno group's" method of analyzing verbal behavior. It had been his hope to produce a book about the method and its particular foundation in

Skinner's works. He thought that the method had great promise, particularly in contrast with alternative procedures of verbal analysis which had emerged from the psychoanalytic tradition. Unlike the earlier Red and Black Book Studies, the "Reno group's" method derived more directly from the interpretative effort of Skinner, such as is found in *Verbal Behavior*, rather than the direct manipulation of contingencies as found in *The Behavior of Organisms*.

In the proposed book Willard wanted to bring together the doctoral work of several of his students: Brian Lahren's research on stimulus control of descriptive verbal behavior, Marguerite McCorkle on the stimulus control of women's talk about sex-role conflict, John Gibbin on a functional analysis of defensive verbal behavior in psychotherapy sessions, Darrell Downs on the stimulus control of pauses in on-going verbal behavior, Harold Cook on observable stimulus-response relations in descriptive and explanatory verbal behavior, Diane Spooner on the development of new discriminations in assessing stimulus control, Marcia Bennett on a conceptual analysis of radical behaviorist epistemology, and Michael Dougherty on a preliminary analysis of the Red and Black Book Studies. Each of these works represented some aspect of what Willard had come to believe important in the understanding of talk. He thought that "when all the work is considered together as a whole, a much better picture of how each study plays its own part in developing our systematic position emerges."

Willard's distinctive classroom method of dealing with *Verbal Behavior* was described by Marica Bennett, in remarks prepared for the memorial services held in Reno: "We read and re-read *Verbal Behavior*. I remember at least three seminars in which that book was discussed, paragraph by paragraph. One goal in the classes was to find passages in the

book which exemplified Skinner's methods of interpretative analysis. We also collected samples of verbal behavior on our own—from conversations or letters—and tried our hand at interpretative analysis in the spirit of the book."

Willard was fascinated with people's talk wherever he found it. In a successful sabbatical application some years ago, he wrote: "For many years since my last sabbatical leave I was a member of the Parking and Traffic Board, a service which I enjoyed very

much." He was not being factious, unlike many faculty members compelled to do such work. He really did find the explanations offered to the committee interesting. It was talk to be analyzed and understood, and that's what he wanted to do, and hoped that others would also. He believed that the analysis offered in *Verbal Behavior* was the best guide in such matters, that it was unique in Western intellectual thought. *Verbal Behavior* is more valued and studied nowadays in part because of Willard Day's insistence.



Willard F. Day, Jr.
1926–1989